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Gromyko Likely to Take Role as Moscow's Elder Statesman

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MOSCOW—The surprise elevation of Andrei A. Gromyko from foreign minister to president of the Soviet Union will not affect Soviet foreign policy, diplomats and Kremlin officials said Tuesday.

While he resigned as first deputy premier, Gromyko is expected to play the role of elder statesman on selected foreign issues, the observers said in the wake of the changes in high offices announced early in the day.

Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev, who had been expected to assume the presidential title to go with his powerful post as Communist Party general secretary, indicated that he shunned the additional job to devote more time to the lagging economy.

Eduard A. Shevardnadze, Communist Party chief in the Republic of Georgia and a new Politburo member, was named to replace Gromyko, who will be 76 years old July 18.

Gromyko, once known as "Mr. Nyet" for casting a string of Soviet vetoes at the United Nations in the depths of the Cold War, has been foreign minister for 28 years under five party leaders, starting with Nikita S. Khrushchev.

Met Many U.S. Leaders

He has conferred with every American President since Franklin D. Roosevelt, advised Soviet leader Josef Stalin at Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam conferences and assisted in founding the United Nations.

In nominating him for the largely ceremonial position, Gorbachev called Gromyko "an eminent politician, one of the oldest party members." The 57-year-old Shevardnadze, by contrast, has practically no foreign experience, although he is regarded by Western observers as a smart and effective leader in the Gorbachev style.

As usual in the Supreme Soviet, both Gromyko and Shevardnadze (pronounced Sheh-ward-NAHD-zyeh) were elected by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes.

The Gromyko switch came as a surprise because each of Gorbachev's three most recent predecessors also held the office of president.

In fact, it was Gorbachev who argued that the party general secretary also should occupy the role of head of state when he nominated Konstantin U. Chernenko for the position in April, 1984.

Former Soviet leader Leonid I. Brezhnev became the first party chief to add the title of president, in 1977, replacing the little-known Nikolai V. Podgorny. Brezhnev said at the time that the title would place the general secretary on the same footing with other heads of state, such as the American President.

But on Tuesday, Gorbachev said the party's Central Committee at its meeting the previous day "found it advisable" that he should concentrate on major domestic tasks rather than take on additional duties.

Western diplomats said, however, that Gorbachev was clearly calling the shots in the unexpected

maneuver after Monday's dumping of his chief rival, Grigory V. Romanov, from the ruling body.

Gorbachev was elected to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, a government post that would give him official standing to meet with foreign dignitaries. The Supreme Soviet is the nation's nominal parliament.

His close associate, Yegor K. Ligachev, was named chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Supreme Soviet, a position Gorbachev held before he was named general secretary.

Western diplomats said they believed that Ligachev, 64, is now the heir-apparent, just as Gorbachev was during Chernenko's brief tenure.

When Ligachev's new post was approved, he and Gorbachev appeared together on the rostrum, smiling broadly. Ligachev vaulted into political prominence recently, rising from the party Secretariat to full Politburo status last April without the usual period as a candidate or non-voting member.

In Tuesday's Supreme Soviet session, however, it was mainly Gromyko's day. He sat unsmiling on the podium in his usual somber gray suit, eyelids closed at times as if he were napping.

When Gorbachev reached over to shake hands in congratulation, the man sometimes known as "Grim Grom" permitted himself a small smile in return.

At the lectern, Gromyko made a brief speech thanking Gorbachev for praising him, adding, "It is not for me to judge whether I deserve such words or not . . . I am deeply moved . . ."

Though some Western diplomats said Gromyko was sidelined or even "kicked upstairs," there was no sign of any rift between Gorbachev and the durable diplomat. In fact, Gromyko strongly supported the 54-year-old party chief for the top Kremlin job last march.



Reuters

Eduard Shevardnadze

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